

Monster's Analysis

Vulnerable Anthropology and Deaf Superhero-becomings

Joseph Michael Valente

Valente admits there were a number of episodes/topics of his life that were off limits in writing [d/Deaf and d/Dumb], such as a description of his abusive father and a serious medical scare early in his life, so that he could focus on his journey toward being part of Deaf culture. I hope this gifted writer decides someday to write a complete memoir. If this book is any indication, his recounting of these painful events could have wide resonance with many readers.

Frances D' Andrea, Teachers College Record (November 25, 2012)

These memories are 'punctual' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1999) in that they refer to a specific point on a timeline. Because they often refer to times often forgotten till cued or stimulated, these memories are reterritorialising.

Jonathan Skinner (2013)

1. An Autoethnographic Account of the Real Hulk

It's Friday, August 3, 1979. I'm nearly four years old. This summer we moved into our new home on Bayport Avenue in Bayport, New York. I can't wait for tonight because Mommy promised I could stay up past my 8 o'clock bedtime to watch *The Incredible Hulk* on television because I was a brave boy when I was in the hospital for the surgery on my leg. I love all things superhero. Superheroes are brave. But Mommy keeps worrying. She worries the *Hulk* will be too scary. I keep telling her Hulk and Spiderman are my favorite superheroes. I can't wait to see the new *Hulk* because he isn't a

cartoon—the new hulk is a real *Hulk*. This *Hulk* TV show is real life like *Batman* and *Wonder Woman*.

After we eat lunch, Mommy talks with Nanny on the phone for a long time. When she hangs up, Mommy tells my older brother John and me she has good news.

If you are good, Mommy says, Nanny and Poppy are babysitting tonight *and* your cousins are sleeping over this weekend. Your Father and I are going to the diner and drive-in movie with Aunt Edie and Uncle Stevey.

I let out a happy roar, Ah-Ri'!

John fist pumps and shouts, This is going to be so rad!

Mommy says, Now go clean your rooms.

When we finish cleaning, Mommy keeps repeating all day:

'Get ready.'

'Don't make a mess!'

'Be ready for 5 o'clock supper.'

For the entire afternoon, I ask Mommy over and over, Is it 5 o'clock?

Finally Mommy says, Why don't you go sit on the stoop and wait for your Father?

K, I say.

I sit on the front stoop and wait for what feels like hours. Father finally pulls up to the house in his white Slomin's Oil work van. He walks from his van, up the driveway, and into the garage. I follow a step behind Father, babbling to him about how everyone is coming over soon. Father hands me his dirty work clothes and I take them from the garage and into the house to hand over to Mommy for her to wash. I like the familiar smell of oil that always clings to the clothes and air. Out the front door window, I can see Nanny and Poppy's shiny new blue Oldsmobile pull up to the house. I go inside to find

Mommy as Father takes a shower. Mommy greets Nanny and Poppy, opening the door. Nanny's holding a King Kullen grocery bag filled with supper and goodies for tonight.

I give Nanny and Poppy a hug and kiss in the foyer.

Hi, Joey, Nanny says, patting me on the head.

Poppy smells like oil too. He pats me on the head but looks cranky. Mommy and Nanny stand in the foyer and jibber jabber. I watch Poppy walk past everyone into the living room, turn on the television box, set the station to channel 11 WPIX, and sit in his chair. When Mommy and Nanny stop jibber jabbering in the foyer, Mommy scurries about the house cleaning up before my cousins arrive. Nanny goes into the kitchen and unpacks the goodies from the grocery bag onto the table: Doritos, Chips Ahoy! cookies, and ice cream. Then Nanny starts supper. I help Nanny boil the water to make Kraft Macaroni and Cheese and keep her company as she fries the chopped meat on the stove.

Where's your brother? Nanny asks.

Dunno, I reply.

Nanny gives me a smile and says, No fighting with Poppy tonight, please, OK? Be a good boy. You are Poppy reincarnated, you know that?

Cuz me and Poppy look the schame, ri'?, I say.

Nanny says, Yes. And you both love to argue with everyone. That temper of yours is from Poppy. You both have that Irish temper. Whew!

We have green eyes too!

She laughs, Yes, you do.

Nanny breaks up the chopped meat in the frying pan, wipes her hands on a towel, and softly rubs my cheek with the backside of her hand. In her playful, pleading voice, Nanny pulls my chin up to see

her face, Look at me. Remember, what did I say? Let Poppy be alone tonight, OK? He's upset.

Why? I ask.

A Yankee baseball player Poppy likes died in an airplane crash yesterday, Nanny tells me.

Oh, I reply. Did he get hurt? I ask.

I don't really know, Joey. He went to Heaven really fast. Just be nice. Be nice to Poppy tonight, OK? No arguing with Poppy, your brother, or your cousins, OK?

K, I reply. Was it Mr. October? I ask.

No, Thurman Munson, Nanny tells me.

Oh, he's a Yankee? Munster's a monster, ri' ?

Yes, Munson played catcher for the Yankees, Nanny answers. But now her attention turns to the meat frying on the stove, not me.

I say I'll tell Poppy I'm sorry Munster hurt. Sad he can't play Yankees.

Nanny squeezes my cheeks. She looks down at me and says, That's sweet, Joey, go ahead tell Poppy quick but then leave Poppy alone, OK?

K, Nanny.

I walk up to Poppy. He sits slouching in the chair, watching the TV. I say, Sorry Herman Munster hurt, Poppy.

Wha—?, he says.

I just stand there. He has an angry look on his face.

Wha—?!, Poppy raises his voice.

Schorry 'erman Munschter hurt, I repeat.

Poppy yells to Nanny in the kitchen, Lois! What the hell does he want?! Phil Rizzuto is interviewing George Steinbrenner about the crash right now, and I'm missing the whole damn thing with this— Nanny pokes her head around the corner into the living room and sees

my confused face. She wags her finger and scolds Poppy.

Jack! What did I tell you before we came here? Just be nice. Say thank you to Joey. He's being sweet.

I don't even know what the hell I'm thanking him for, Lois

Jack! What did I say?

Nanny rarely yells at Poppy. Usually Poppy yells at Nanny.

When Nanny disappears back into the kitchen, Poppy turns to me and barks, Thanks, Joey. Now get out of the way of the TV. As I walk away, he curses at the TV.

Why Poppy cursing? I ask Nanny when we get into the kitchen.

Nanny tells me, God curses the Yankees so Poppy curses them too.

While I am in the kitchen with Nanny, my cousins come racing through the front door. They have their gym bags stuffed with clothes and toys for the weekend. Father comes out showered and smelling of soap and Old Spice. Everyone says hello. All the adults sit at the kitchen table except Poppy because Steinbrenner is still on the TV talking.

My cousins put their bags away in our room. When my cousins are done, John's head pops out from behind the basement door. He says something to my cousins Keith and Roxanne, who is giving baby Michael a piggyback ride, and they all disappear to the basement. When our parents are about to leave, all the kids are downstairs playing except for me. I'm not really sure why nobody told me everybody was downstairs.

When my cousins and John come running up the stairs, I catch Roxanne at the top step, Why you not call me?

Roxanne says, Cuz you got cancer. You can't play with cancer.

Huh? I give her a blank look.

Before Roxanne can reply, I see her look past me and quickly

make a get-away into the kitchen. I turn around to see Aunt Edie's face and she's giving Roxanne *the Look*.

Aunt Edie says, Joey, don't listen to Roxanne. You're not sick.

I'm sick? I ask. I didn't know I was sick.

Aunt Edie tells me, No, Joey, you're fine. But I can't make out her face good enough to be sure.

When our parents leave to go out, all of us kids eat supper at the kitchen table with Nanny. Nanny hands each of us a plate of macaroni and cheese from the stove, starting with the youngest Michael up to the oldest Keith. All of us spoon our own chopped meat onto our plates, and I mix up the macaroni and cheese with the chopped meat. Nanny doesn't care that I drown my food in Heinz Ketchup. She doesn't make any of us finish what's on our plates either and reminds us to save room for dessert.

After supper Nanny cleans up and we play shuffleboard in the basement until Nanny flashes the basement lights and calls for us from the top of the stairs to come watch *The Incredible Hulk*. When we get upstairs to the kitchen, the spoons, bowls, ice cream, Cool Whip, sprinkles, bananas, and Hershey's Chocolate Syrup are set out on the table.

Nanny asks me to get Poppy from the living room so he can get some ice cream too. When I go to get him, I see Poppy is already passed out in the chair. The TV channel is tuned to the Yankees' home network channel 11 WPIX. I see Yankee Stadium's baseball field on the TV screen but no Yankees. The grass field is covered with a blue tarp because it's raining. When the camera pans the crowd waiting in the stands and zooms in to show faces under their umbrellas, raincoats, or newspapers, it looks like the fans are at a funeral, not a baseball game.

I turn the knob to channel 2 CBS for *The Incredible Hulk* because

it starts at 8 o'clock. I don't want to miss 8 o'clock and miss the TV show. John and Keith are already settled in on the comfy couch with their bowls filled with ice cream.

John says, Grab the Doritos too.

K, I say. I run to the kitchen.

In the kitchen, Roxanne is helping Michael wipe ice cream off his shirt and face over the sink. Nanny grabs Michael down from the sink and lets him go. She turns to Roxanne and tells her something and then says to me, Where's Poppy? Did you tell him?

I say, Poppy's sleeping, Nanny.

Nanny says, Oh, that's good. Now we won't have to argue over the TV.

We all settle around Nanny on the couch and floor in front of the TV, and Poppy snores loudly. The heavy TV set sits centered inside a large wood cabinet. The cabinet also holds Father's treasured stereo system with a record player, eight-track, and radio. Both ends of the wood cabinet have these tall standing speakers inside, covered by musky patterned orange-brown speaker cloth. I love to hold my cheeks and chest against the cloth with the music thumping and beating whenever we blast Billy Joel records when we have a babysitter. Sometimes me and John turn the sound knob up so loud that we can hear Billy Joel through our toes all over the house.

I lay my belly on the wood floor, with a pillow to rest my head on as I look straight ahead at the screen a few inches from my face. Poppy is snoring so loudly that everyone keeps complaining so Nanny tells me to turn the knob up higher, then higher again. I lie back down on the floor and can pick up some thumping from the speakers. I never watched TV like this before. I like it because I can hear and feel the TV sounds and voices better with my body on the wood floor.

The Incredible Hulk opens with the camera focused on the word

ANGER written in white block letters on a flashing red light. A panicky siren sound vibrates through the wood floor into my chest. The camera then rolls backward to reveal that the word is really DANGER and it's from the Gamma Ray machine Dr. Banner is strapped into. The siren sounds fade, and a man's voice comes through the speakers:

Dr. David Banner: phys—, scien—. Searching for—hidden—humans have—an accidental overdose—gamma—adiation—chem—try—when—Banner grows angry, outraged, a startling—creature—rage—reporter.

[Banner:] “Mr. Mc—,—me angry—when—angry.”—*creature is wanted—murder he didn't commit. David Banner—believed to be dead—he is dead, until he can find a way to control the raging spirit—within him.*

My eyes soak in the visual narrative of Hulk, his “crazy face”, “big eyes”, “green body”, and his “Rahrrrrr, Rahrrrrr!” vibrating through the wood floors into my already furiously pumping heart. I pee all over myself. A puddle of urine gathers beneath me. I'm frozen with fear thinking back to the last time I had an accident. Father warned me that I'd get a worse belt whipping next time—that I'd get no TV.

I'm tired of this shit, Father always says. If I cry to Mommy, I know he'll beat me more.

I try to stand up without anyone noticing me or the urine on the floor. John looks over and sees the guilt on my face and in my movements. I walk next to where John and Keith are sitting on the couch, past Nanny who's not paying attention. It looks to me like John is about to say something with his nose crinkling. I think he smells my pee and is about to rat me out. On the coffee table I see a yellow pencil and pick it up. John's eyes widen when he realizes what

I'm about to do. I jam the pencil with all my might into his arm. In the resulting chaos, I sneak into the bathroom to change out of my pee-drenched clothes before anyone else finds out.

2. Making the invisible visible

In early 2011, I published my research novel *d/Deaf and d/Dumb: A Portrait of a Deaf Kid as a Young Superhero*, a collection of twenty-five literary and anthropological episodes describing my personal and professional experiences growing up deaf and traversing hearing, Deaf, and liminal spaces. Not too long afterward, I finally succumb to the realization I'm feeling as tormented by the childhood memories I did write about in *d/Deaf and d/Dumb* as those I didn't write about. While I'm battling these pains from the past, I'm also battling torments in the present. As I'm undergoing a process of acculturation into Deaf cultural membership as a 30-odd year old man while a professor at a hearing university, the everyday realities of my communicative differences places me squarely outside of the margins of both Deaf and hearing worlds. It also kicks up the torment of always being the different one in the group. After all, as *d/Deaf and d/Dumb* closes out, now I'm supposed to "more fully start living in both places" (Valente, 2011, p. 144). But what I didn't plan for was being traumatized by the costs of adding another place to be different, with another community with members to make judgments on my progress with acculturation and learning sign language. Apparently, I exchanged hearing-impaired for sign-impaired. I exchanged, "Wow, your speech is so good for a deaf guy" with "Wow, your sign has really improved". Somehow these frequent comments, even as they are meant to be encouragement, feel similarly patronizing. In the Deaf world, I'm hearing. In the hearing world, I'm deaf.

At first, I sensed something amiss around the summer of 2012,

around the time I was conducting fieldwork interviewing informants in Paris, Toulouse, Bordeaux, Poitiers and elsewhere in France about the anthropological films of bilingual deaf children in France, Japan, and the United States that our research team made. I usually depart and arrive back into the airport in New York to visit a few nights with my nieces, nephews, and family, driving the five-hour trip from central Pennsylvania, where my university is located, to my hometown Bayport, New York, about fifty miles east of Manhattan on Long Island. By the time I return to the United States and arrive home to Pennsylvania State University after the stopover to visit family in New York, I'm completely worn out. What I can only describe as emotive foreshocks and trauma tremors bubble something kryptonic to the surface each day. I finally come to realize I'm retreating more often into my own imaginary world the more I'm feeling retraumatized by my difference.

When I start to hide from the world, I know I have to go back to therapy. My earliest memories going to therapy hark back to when I was four years old, with Dr. Chesterfields and his room full of toys. In my thirty plus years of on-and-off therapy, I knew enough to tune into and track the frequencies and intensities of traumas appearing, to watch for these like someone watches for a deadly disease to return. My grand experiment in *d/Deaf and d/Dumb*— “therapy by theory” designed “to transform painful memories into superpowerful memories” worked brilliantly in some ways and backfired horribly in others.

In this chapter, I once again borrow James Joyce's concept of “one aneithier” I put to use in *d/Deaf and d/Dumb* to “fuse the vernaculars of social sciences and humanities” and “transcend limiting, binary ways of thinking” (p. 12). In addition to meshing ethnographic methods and storytelling genres, this chapter builds on my previous work

experimenting with “messy texts”(Marcus, 1994) and “fragmented writing styles”(Clifford, 1983) to narratively illustrate the affective dimensions of liminal spaces that I inhabit, traverse, and carry out fieldwork. If liminality is the space, interstices can perhaps be thought of as the portals that give access to this space. Boldt and Valente (in press) explain,

Interstices occur when the intensities of affect—our sense of connection to a child or situation, for example—get broken and we are forced into the messiness of examining and critiquing the norms and desires that structure our own meaning making, our desires for communality, as we witness events (p. 6).

I first came to learn about and engage with psychoanalytic theory and Deleuze and Guattari (1987) at the prodding of my colleague Dr. Gail Boldt, who has led a Deleuzoguattarian reading group at Penn State for several years now. My introduction to the ideas that Patti Lather (2001) describes as “postfoundational possibilities” led me to eventually see *d/Deaf and d/Dumb* as an affective artifact with a force of its own that is sometimes unexplainable even to me. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) describe a book to be “a body without organs” where the audience is “becoming a part of the assemblage that is the text” denying the comforts of certainty, closure, and resolution (Lather, 2001, p. 212). In other words, *d/Deaf and d/Dumb* has taken on a life of its own.

These ideas about reflexively and affectively engaged anthropologists are not entirely new. Around the turn of the twentieth century Bronislaw Malinowski and Franz Boas’ major contribution to anthropology was their development of modern ethnographic methods for fieldwork. Previously “armchair anthropologists” would

never actually set foot in the places they were to be describing. The Enlightenment movement, with its belief in scientific and rational thinking, had the effect of splitting participant-observation into the personal and professional. Rationalism is taken to be the belief that humans and human sciences can be objective. Anthropology like many social sciences began to believe Enlightenment narratives of science and rationality can be achieved by controlling for the human variable and directly addressing objectivity and subjectivity. In response “some anthropologists of the mid-twentieth century...attempted to grapple with the imponderabilia of the anthropologist’s subjective biases” by fine-tuning instruments, measurements, and methods to create a detached observer who could achieve objectivity (Heald & Deluz, p. 11).

But something gets lost in all this, that is, the professional accounts get published while the personal accounts of fieldwork are left to diaries and anecdotal stories for entertainment. As Heald and Deluz (1994) make clear, “the aspect that concerns us here is their ‘distance’. The accounts were de-emotionalized, presented as apart from the observer, who entered only as an independent witness, setting the scene and authenticating it” (p. 10). Later on, anthropologists Edmund Leach and Max Gluckman went to analysis before and after going into the field and even advised their own students to do the same. But this was only to control the subjectivity of the researcher in preparation for fieldwork. Leach and Gluckman believed the elimination of researcher bias could be achieved through “self-knowledge [and that would] facilitate a greater objectivity in the field, to turn the self into a more perfect observing instrument” (Heald & Deluz, p. 11). Before the era of reflexivity, postmodern concerns with representation, and the questioning of “rendering authoritative accounts” (Marcus & Fischer, 1986; Clifford & Marcus, 1986), George Devereux expounded on “the

creative dynamics of the fieldwork encounter. In this work, he was among the first to argue for the fundamental difference between the natural and the human sciences” (Heald & Deluz, p. 11). Devereux argued “objectivity was not only a myth but a barrier towards a fuller understanding of the nature of the human person and society” (p. 11). Through psychoanalysis, Devereux learned “anxiety was not something to be avoided but is the driving force which propels our intellectual questings” (p. 12). For anthropologists interested in the politics of affect, anxieties are not downplayed but instead revealed and explored as encounters with affective potential.

This chapter attempts to make the invisible visible, using the “self as instrument” (Eisner, 1991; Barone, 2001; Valente, 2011) through engagements with, Deleuzoguattarian perspective where the subject is conceived as a catalyst of vital forces that express themselves through affective encounters and becomings. The Deleuzoguattarian mode of thinking also enables me to explore the value of narcissism as a potentially creative force seeking to connect with multiple bodies, and not simply as the manifestation of the subject’s struggle for a unified ego (Rio, 2008, p. 20).

When affective encounters emerge with the past, it’s all too easy to let such moments slip by undetected. Affective encounters emerge from the ordinary and everyday as Kathleen Stewart (2007) describes,

Ordinary affects are the varied, surging capacities to affect and be affected that give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies, and emergences. They’re things that happen. They happen in impulses, sensations, expectations, daydreams, encounters, and habits of relating, in strategies and their failures, in forms of persuasion, contagion, and compulsion, in modes of attention, attachment, and agency, and in public and

social worlds of all kinds that catch people up in something that feels like *something* (pp. 1-2).

Affective encounters have political features that if made visible can illustrate “the ongoing impact of affectations on the ways bodies negotiate, balance, or unbalance power relations with other bodies” (Rio, 2008, p. 210). Even somewhat seasoned autoethnographers attempting to reflexively grapple with our inner lives and descriptively account for the imponderabilia of our subjectivities struggle to make sense of the emergence of affective encounters with the past, present, future, anxieties, curiosities, fantasies, ignorance, desires, fears, indifferences, and avoidances. These affective encounters are moments that have potential for unveiling the powers of affection and stir us to bring into the purview of our fieldwork what is not visible. The rushed pace of contemporary lives leaves us in “this cultural state of visible frenzy” that “has the effect of reinforcing our customary state of numbness” disconnecting us from affectively engaging our thoughts and feelings (Rio, 2008, p. 210).

The move to overlook or avoid purposefully or not the pleasures and pains this artifact from the past engenders—be it a memory, a photograph, a letter, an heirloom, a familiar smell, a random reminiscence, an urge, a craving, or a word or phrase that reminds us of something long ago—is the interstice that an affectively engaged autoethnographers does their fieldwork. If life’s pace is too quick, which is often the case for many of us, it’s all too easy to continue to let these affective encounters go undetected. Massumi (2002) and Leander and Boldt (2013) describe “affect” as the body’s unlimited potential to affect and be affected. Whether autoethnographers decide to engage and explore these affective encounters—recognize them as an opportunity to engage our inner worlds—determines the shape

of our psyche. The writing of these affective encounters agitates, stirs *something* monstrous inside me (Valente, 2011; Garoian, 2013; Stewart, 2007).

3. A Memory from d/Deaf and d/Dumb

Dr. I. King Jordan, the first Deaf president of Gallaudet University is there. I get up my courage and walk over. The timing is perfect; he's now standing alone.

"Hi," I say, extending my hand.

Dr. Jordan shakes my hand, nods his head, signing and speaking, he says, "Hi. What's your name?"

"Joe," I say rather sheepishly, feeling worried he's going to judge me for not being able to sign. I am worried too that I can only read lips and am trying to be conscious that I'm not invading his space in my attempts to understand.

"What brings you here, Joe?" He seems way too kind for someone I consider to be a celebrity. Dr. Jordan actually seems interested in meeting me.

"Well," I stumble, unsure what to say in what I know will be a short conversation before someone takes his attention away, "I guess, I sort of had an epiphany."

He looks me in the eye. "What kind?"

I get so nervous, I spill everything out as quickly as I can: I tell him how much I've pined to become a part of Deaf culture, to learn ASL, to do something – contribute something to the Deaf-World.

Dr. Jordan's mouth turns into a knowing smile like he's heard this story many times before. I know he has. He looks at me, puts his hand on my arm to show he understands all these built up emotions, and says these words to me before someone whisks him off for his keynote, "Welcome home."

4. The aftermath

About a year and a half after the release of *d/Deaf and d/Dumb*, I enter psychoanalysis to deal with the emotional fallout. It's not because *d/Deaf and d/Dumb* wasn't being well received. Quite the opposite happens actually. As if the cosmos decided it was high time for me to get some payback after a lifetime of being extraordinary for all the wrong reasons, *d/Deaf and d/Dumb* starts taking off. With invitations and the book in hand, I take the show on the road doing readings of selected chapters for academic and generalist audiences. At first, I use these book readings as an experiment to watch and listen for signs of how readings from *d/Deaf and d/Dumb* affect my audiences and how these audience discussions affect me. I take notice as *d/Deaf and d/Dumb* book readings start becoming something else as I observe that these events affect audiences and, in turn, audience reactions to these readings affect me in unexpected and oftentimes unexplainable ways. For a good amount of time, even as I can sense the mental health costs of the book's writing and rewriting processes take shape, I keep these troubles at bay with the pleasures of becoming that "superhero writer" I had always dreamed of becoming.

Before long, *d/Deaf and d/Dumb* lands me regular gigs on the lecture circuit at universities, schools, public events, conferences, and performances. Then there is growing interest from newspapers, magazines, and the blogospheres. There are also glowing book reviews in prominent journals. I'm interviewed on a public television talk show. Within the year, with my run of good luck continuing, I'm selected to give a filmed talk for a local TED conference to be posted on YouTube. TED is a publicity machine with the motto 'ideas worth spreading' that films short, provocative talks given by intellectuals, activists, artists, and public figures. In this 16-minute TED video "Hearing the Unheard," I perform a reading of selected portions

of the opening chapter where I discover my superpowers to craft superpowerful stories that affect people and describe how as an adult I use these superpowers to bring much-needed attention to research that shows the importance of bilingual education for deaf children. Within a short while, the TED video counts over 25 thousand views and the World Federation of the Deaf, representing 70 million deaf people worldwide and over 130 national associations, embeds the video on its website for their member viewers. Life is most surely on the up and up. In an underprivileged world, I've now become one of the most privileged.

How can any superhero crash and burn at a time like this?

By this time, I've unapologetically sopped up every morsel of pleasure possible living this life of a coach-flying, low-flying Z-list superstar academic, a recipient of emergent scholar awards, fellowships, and a major grant from the prestigious Spencer Foundation to study deaf bilingual preschoolers in Japan, France, and the United States. By this time, I'm flying off to Paris to deliver an invited address at the international conference hosted by Fédération Nationale des Sourds de France celebrating the 300th Anniversary of Abbé de L'Épée's birth. By this time, I'm flying off to England to present at the celebrated Centre for Deaf Studies at the University of Bristol and elsewhere within the United States and internationally. *By this time*, I've sufficiently built up enough evidence to support my delusions of grandeur to not only finally "belong somewhere" and fulfill my promise "to contribute something to the Deaf World" but also maybe even find a place where I can finally be accepted unconditionally and rid myself of this burden of difference that has been and continues to be my existence (Valente, 2011, p. 10 and p. 122).

5. “Monster Joey”

Imagine my delight when I discovered my schoolyears dossier. A short time ago I had the good fortune of getting copies of my files from all the years I was in school. After several failed attempts to get a copy of my dossier from the school district office, I finally managed to convince a staff person with access to confidential files to go down into the dusty, cobwebbed cellars of the original 1927 Bayport-Blue Point High School building to retrieve my dossier.

Much to my surprise, it was a thickly descriptive file. Back in the late 70’s and throughout the 80’s my teachers wrote narrative descriptions about my physical, emotional, and social development, descriptions of my likes and dislikes, descriptions of classroom incidents, and so on. Records also included similarly descriptive psychological evaluations, IQ and state-mandated tests, audiograms, special education evaluations and reports—even sample writings and drawings.

What I found inside the bulky file shocked me. It included records collected from the time I entered preschool at three years, 11-months old in 1979 until I graduated high school in 1994, totaling fifteen years and hundreds of pages. Inside the file folder were thick descriptive accounts, reports, and evaluations from my teachers, psychologists, speech therapists, resource room teachers, medical doctors, audiologists, and from school, district, and government administrators and offices, each offering insights into how professionals in young Joey’s immediate world at that time experienced and described him.

It was in this dossier that I found a neatly typewritten, two-page teacher report dated October 1979. I noticed the report at first because the paper was yellowed with age and then my attention turned to the block letters NEW INTERDISCIPLINARY SCHOOL imprinted on the letterhead, its one-time Medford, New York address,

and its outdated 516 telephone area code that Suffolk County used to share with Nassau County. My attention next shifted to reading descriptions Mrs. P. wrote in the report to explain her reasoning for referring me for a psychological evaluation:

Emotionally, Joey is showing some signs of problems which concern us at this time. For example, he often talks about punishment and will act out such things as “spanking” or “burning” the “bad child”. He also dramatically plays out such things as dying and accidents with more fervor and involvement than might be expected of a child his age. Also, when he gets involved with acting out a role of punishing a child, he seems to almost lose control of himself.

Thumbing through the hundreds of pages in the file, I locate the psychological evaluation from February 28, 1980 when I was four years, eight-months old. The psychologist reports the evaluation was initiated as result of repeated incidents with “monster Joey” in class, with “teachers report[ing] that [Joey] is often seen physically venting his anger at them in a ‘play’ situation and that he has difficulty at these times separating play from reality”. The report goes on to explain,

Projective materials indicate that Joey’s general self-concept is adequate, yet he is often concerned about issues of personal blame for his actions. Joey perseverated upon themes of jail and punishment. His teachers report that he has difficulty at these times separating play from reality. Other issues involve blame for “cocky-poo” and similar bodily functions, and a consequent focusing upon “monsters” who destroy everything.

There is something about monsters that feels limitless. In my earliest memories, all sorts of monsters roamed between my real and imagined worlds. As a young kid watching *The Incredible Hulk* on television, I can remember studying the Hulk's expressions of anger, with his eyes bulging, nose flaring, hot-blooded veins throbbing, tensing muscles, and frightening RARAGHH! That green body, crazy hair and those bushy eyebrows terrified me in the beginning. But then that terror gave way to me mimicking the Hulk myself to terrify others. When I came to know the horrors that were Count Dracula, Frankenstein, werewolves, vampires, ghosts, the Devil, Satan, the anti-Christ, demons, and all the horrible evils Hollywood and Hell could conjure up, I remember I made a conscious decision very early on to steer clear of monsters. My world was already scary enough.

But my fascination with the Hulk always remained. Thinking about my early psyche, *The Incredible Hulk* TV show affected my expressivity and my identity as "monster Joey". Internally, I can also remember adopting the idea that anger is what fueled a transformation into the Hulkian rage. This made sense to my young mind. It easily connected directly with the way that I experienced the world, too. In so many ways, the dualism of Dr. Banner/Hulk resonated with my childlike understanding of the world. It was an uncertain landscape to navigate, where bad people did bad deeds. *The Incredible Hulk* storyline of an intellectual, a maverick, a nomad, traveling from place to place and by happenstance trouble finds him or he finds trouble is similar to other TV shows that I watched with equal fervor. The Hulk was not merely an image of what I imagined "monster Joey" looked like to the outside world, this angry monster also offered an escape valve for my fantasies and a medium for working through what was for my young self an expression of limitless anger.

Such limitless anger would never fly in those days in that

house, not with Father. I knew then—and I know now—that when I unleashed my temper, if it emerged when Father was home, the consequences would be severe. In a home with an abusive, alcoholic father and a mother who herself was raised by an alcoholic, it was expected that “children be seen, not heard”—Father, a tall, muscular, Marine of a man expected no less from his children. It wasn’t until psychoanalysis that I understood what triggered my transformation into “monster Joey” was not only my communication difference but also re-experiencing the abuse and medical traumas of my early years.

6. Excerpted from Fall 2012 Diary

It occurred to me for the first time that my voice really isn’t a “gift”—it’s a curse. A week ago when a high-ranking university officer named Dr. Sparks emailed to remind me about a talk I agreed to give at an event on campus to celebrate diversity, I wrote her back to ask if the arrangements for my ASL interpreters were set. In her reply, Dr. Sparks explained that I “spoke so well last time we met” there is “no need for me to get an interpreter” and that she “had no idea I would need interpreters for these events” and “no arrangements had been made” because she was “not informed of my needs in writing” in any of our previous email communications. In her terse email, I noticed three separate sentences where Dr. Sparks reiterated she was not informed “in writing” that I “needed interpreters to do my job”.

In my response, I explained that since I had an interpreter with me in my two previous one-on-one meetings with Dr. Sparks, I had assumed she would know an interpreter would be needed for the event she was hosting. In this same email, I also explained that I work regularly with my interpreting agency and that the director was being copied on these emails so that agency could still have an interpreter available.

During the next email exchange, Dr. Sparks wrote that she did not know that *she* was to request interpreters and had assumed that I took care of my own arrangements for interpreters because she did not do so for our first meetings. Also, Dr. Sparks explained that since she was unaware of “my needs,” no funds had been set-aside in the budget. Dr. Sparks then went on to explain she looked at the guidelines for requesting ASL interpreters and that there was a lengthy application process and deadlines that had already passed. The costs to hire the interpreters would unduly burden her office, and she did not have time to fill out the application for ASL interpreters. Dr. Sparks also asked what the cost of the interpreters would be and if this would be waived because it was considered an “educational program” open to the public. Once again in this email, Dr. Sparks reiterated in three separate sentences that she was “not informed of my needs in writing” that it was her responsibility, not mine, to request and hire interpreters!

In the third volley back to Dr. Sparks, I emailed that it was understandable she didn’t know about requesting the interpreters (but I didn’t add her ignorance about this still didn’t mean it wasn’t her responsibility) and that was why I was checking-in so to be sure everything would be set to go. I also explained that it was not unusual for interpreters to be booked a week in advance and that there was still plenty of time to make this work. Additionally, I explained that I was not too sure about how the process for paying interpreters worked but that I assumed it was the department or unit that was responsible for payment. I did explain that, according to the American with Disabilities Act, legally I was really not supposed to be a part of the discussions about pay for interpreters. Also, I told her that if there was an issue about funding the interpreters to let me know and I’d chat with my department head or college dean as I was certain they’d want me to participate in these diversity events. I then explained that

she was misunderstanding the process for requesting interpreters, and I assured her that the application procedure for requesting ASL interpreters she emailed about earlier was not something *she had* to do but that it was a one-time application process that *I had* to do when I first came to Penn State to give evidence that I was deaf. Finally, I explained that the ADA compliance office could help with any questions she had and that the interpreting agency already responded to my earlier email that they had interpreters scheduled to be available for the talk. Once again, I copied the ADA office and interpreting agency in this exchange and explained to Dr. Sparks that I was confident we could move things along smoothly.

I'm frustrated by these exchanges with Dr. Sparks: frustrated that she repeatedly writes in her emails that she was unaware that interpreters were needed and her perception that the burden of arranging interpreters (that I had already arranged for anyhow) was solely my own; frustrated at her comment that the interpreters were a cost burden; frustrated that I had to be the one who had to piss her off and request the interpreters in the first place; frustrated that Dr. Sparks was frustrated with me.

I'm mad at myself for having used my voice the first time I visited Dr. Sparks. Had I not used my voice, I'm guessing that maybe Dr. Sparks would have thought to get those interpreters, and I wouldn't be in the spot I'm in now. I wouldn't feel compelled to play the part of the token Deafie who tries to get the hearing folks to understand what is really not understandable anyhow. I suspected all along that she thought I was a Deaf faker anyhow—who would blame her? I know I said the usual line “I can't hear as well as I speak”. I explained the whole damn concept to her in our initial two-hour meeting, but what was I expecting? Was I really expecting that she'd get it? In the end, who's the real dumbass?

We'll see what comes of tomorrow's talk, I guess.

7. The curse that is my voice

The university event is held in an auditorium at the Nittany Lion Inn on campus. Everyone eats from the buffet. I'm alone with my interpreters. We stand at the front, ready to grab the chairs so we can set ourselves up for what will be a full-day event. Tomorrow I will be presenting on panel. I see Dr. Sparks enter the room. She's a regal-looking woman. I see a bunch of faculty circle around her. After a short time, Dr. Sparks breaks away from the group. I've already briefed my interpreters that I will be "voice off" and they will voice for me the whole time we are at the event. They also know about the email exchanges between Dr. Sparks and me. Dr. Sparks sees me and approaches.

JOE (in sign): Hello, Dr. Sparks. I'm looking forward to giving that talk tomorrow.

My interpreter interprets.

DR. SPARKS (speaking but looking at the interpreters): I've been wanting to talk with you about that, Joe. I'm really worried about your talk tomorrow.

JOE (in sign): Why's that?

DR. SPARKS: Are you going to talk?

JOE (in sign): Yes, I plan to give a talk—a presentation, yes.

DR. SPARKS: No, I'm not worried about the talk itself but will you speak? Will you speak for your talk?

JOE (in sign): Why do you ask?

DR. SPARKS: Well, Joe, you speak, so you need to speak. I do not understand how anyone is going to understand you if you don't speak.

JOE (in sign): How are you understanding me now? I'm not speaking

now.

DR. SPARKS: That's my point. You are not speaking now. You spoke so well last time we met.

Dr. Sparks becomes visibly upset, as if I'm being unnecessarily difficult.

JOE (in sign): I understand. But actually for most of my conference presentations now I usually sign, and my topic is about deaf children in bilingual deaf schools so it also connects to my research. So I'm going to sign my presentation tomorrow.

DR. SPARKS: Why do you have to pull the deaf card, Joe?

I become enraged but remain outwardly calm.

JOE (in sign): I'm not sure what you mean by that.

DR. SPARKS: Joe, I'm trying to help you here. Do you understand? How are people at Penn State going to know that you can do your job if you don't speak?

JOE (in sign): What makes you think I can't do my job?

My interpreters start to move around nervously. They know I can explode any minute.

DR. SPARKS: Joe, listen to me. How are they going to know the real Joe, if you don't speak? You do speak! You do speak, Joe! You can speak! People at Penn State will think you can't teach, can't work with students, can't talk, Joe. You need to think about what you are doing to your career here at Penn State.

JOE (in sign): I'll be fine.

Inside I'm anything but fine. I'm dangerously close to exploding. But I can't. She is too powerful. She can destroy my career here.

DR. SPARKS: Tomorrow people need to see the real Joe. OK? You need to do that? I'm not asking you, Joe. Do you

understand?

JOE (in sign): No. I don't understand. Do you mean you are telling me I have to speak tomorrow?

DR. SPARKS: Yes, Joe. I'm doing this for your own good—I'm not letting you damage your career with this silliness. People need to see the real Joe.

JOE (in sign): This is the real Joe. I'm deaf—I use spoken and sign language. I already told you I do not hear like I speak. I can't hear. I need sign language to understand expressive communication.

DR. SPARKS: I don't think you understand, Joe. This is not your choice! You better think long and hard about tomorrow and whether you want to have a future here at Penn State. I'm not doing this to be mean, Joe. I'm doing this because it's best for you.

I'm fuming. I want to strike out at her. Scream at her. I imagine myself screaming at her in front of everyone—screaming, You are an audist! I can't stop her. She keeps haranguing me. I don't sleep for days fueled by rage. The next day, in protest, I sign my presentation and receive a standing ovation from the audience. But the applause can't save me this time.

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